Burma's Christians caught in war

Government soldiers seize on faith as a tactic to terrorize and divide the region's refugees

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HUAY KALOKE REFUGEE CAMP -- On March 11, just after midnight, 17-year-old Sheh Wah Paw and her 15-year-old sister, Thweh Ghay Say Paw, prayed quietly as they listened to the voices of nearby soldiers burning bamboo huts on the border of Thailand and Burma.

The girls huddled with their parents in a makeshift concrete bunker they hoped would protect them.

It didn't.

The flames spread. Their clothing caught fire. The girls scrambled out of the pit and ran. Other refugees tried to stop them, to peel off their burning clothes.

It was too late.

Four days later, the younger girl, known for her long black hair that fell gracefully to the middle of her back, died of her burns. Two weeks later, so did her sister.

They were two more victims in a part of the world many Americans can't identify on a map, in a 50-year-old civil war even fewer follow.

Yet one thing connects these girls to more than 80 percent of the U.S. population: their Christianity -- which indirectly contributed to their deaths.

In Burma, the girls' homeland, a war is raging between a military dictatorship and rebel ethnic groups. To divide the opposition, the Burmese military regime orders Buddhist monks to destroy mosques in large cities to demoralize Muslim ethnic groups. To disparage Chins, a mostly Christian ethnic group, soldiers marry Chin women and force them to convert to Buddhism. To split the Karens, another ethnic group, Burmese soldiers torment Christians and show favoritism to Buddhists while attacking refugee camps.
"It's a convoluted form of religious persecution," says Kevin Hepner, director of the Karen Human Rights Group, based in Thailand. "Yet, where it happens, it's systematic and for political ends."

Edith Mirante, a nationally recognized expert on Burma, agrees. "It's an ongoing effort by the military to emphasize that they and only they are in power. There is no higher power," says Mirante, director of Project Maje, a Portland-based organization highlighting human rights and environmental violations in Burma.

"Nobody is supposed to worship anything that's a rival to the regime, whether it's Islam, Christianity or some form of Buddhism that threatens the regime.

"Among the Karen, the Christians are definitely being targeted. They're definitely being wiped out."

**Burma's biggest ethnic minority, the Karens, fights for independence**

In 1948, Burma -- which the government now calls Myanmar -- gained its independence, ending more than 100 years of British rule. The Karens (pronounced Ka-RENNS) make up the nation's largest ethnic minority group, with their own history, language, culture, economy and territory along the Thailand border. They fought to have their own nation, independent of Burma.

They are still fighting today.

Their leader, General Saw Bomya of the Karen National Union, lives just across the border in Thailand, where he commands, by his own count, 10,000 guerrillas fighting a war against one of the world's largest standing armies, with more than 400,000 troops at its command. Burma experts estimate the number of Karen guerrillas to be even smaller than that.

Nobody knows how many Karens there are because a national census hasn't been taken in Burma since the 1930s. Most academic experts say there are between 3 million and 7 million, though the Karens claim 14 million.

The Karens' religious makeup is also guesswork. They include Christians and some animists, who believe everything in nature has a soul. Nearly everyone agrees Buddhists are in the majority, as they are throughout Burma.
Bomya says about 30 percent of his people are Christian. But almost all the top leaders of the Karen National Union, including Bomya, a Seventh-day Adventist, are Christians, who tend to be better educated because they attended missionary schools when Britain controlled Burma.

Wearing plaid shorts and a tight green golf shirt that reveals a bulging belly, the 71-year-old Bomya looks like the late comedian Jackie Gleason. "This is not a war between the Christians and the Buddhists," he says, leaning back on his chair. "It's between the Burmese and the Karen. But they are using religion as a tool to divide people. "They hate everybody, not just Christians. They're not only killing Christians. They're killing Buddhists as well. But they are especially targeting Christians."

Facing destruction of their churches and restrictions on their worship, attacks on their villages as well as stints of forced labor to help the Burmese military fight their own people, many Karens have fled from Burma. More than 80,000 have crossed the border to live in Thailand; 70,000 have arrived in the past 10 years. The vast majority live in 13 crowded refugee camps.

According to human rights organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch/Asia, the camps are frequently attacked by the Burmese army, which calls itself the State Peace and Development Council. Since 1995, the Burmese army has been joined by the Democratic Kayin Buddhist Army, a renegade faction of the Karen rebels that has sided with the Burmese army.

Because Thailand authorities do not allow the Karen refugees to own guns, they are defenseless. For many, their only weapon is prayer.

They live in bamboo huts with thatched roofs next to jungles where trained elephants pull logs and other heavy loads. Despite the lush surroundings, the dusty, barren camps have little foliage or color. Residents do their best to turn their huts into homes. One family nailed illustrations depicting Bible scenes over their doorway. In large, white block letters, "Jesus is Lord" decorates the entrance to a dormitory for Christian students.

**Cacophony of weapons rousts Christian family from their hut**

For many Karens, religion is their identity. Kyaw Zwa, 55, says he remembers his eldest daughter, 17-year-old Sheh Wah Paw, praying the night of March 10, just before the family went to bed in the Huay Kaloke refugee camp. As was her habit, Sheh Wah Paw thanked God for the family's bamboo hut during a
time when many Karens were homeless and had to sleep under trees in the jungle.

He says he planned to rise the next morning to study the Bible and pray with his wife and daughters, as he always did. But just after midnight, Kyaw Zwa heard the sounds he had long dreaded, the "boof" of shoulder-fired, rocket-propelled grenades, the "kaboom" when they hit their targets and the deafening "ta ta ta ta ta" of a variety of assault rifles, including American-made M-16s and German-built G3s and G4s.

Like many Karens, Kyaw Zwa knew what these sounds meant. Twenty years ago, he lost his left leg as a soldier on the front line, fighting for the Karen National Union in his native Burma.

The family had built their hut with a thatched roof only 30 yards from a Baptist church they regularly attended. They thought that location was a blessing. But on this day, it proved to be a curse. Kyaw Zwa says he grabbed his crutches and hobbled out of his hut under a bright moon, just in time to see eight soldiers ignite the church's thatched roof.

In the refugee camps, many of the Christians think the strategy is to wipe out Christianity among the Karens both in Burma and Thailand. Some families are so afraid that they sleep in the jungle at night, when they think the raids will occur. They return to the camps during daylight.

Kyaw Zwa had dug an 8-foot pit as a hiding place. Fearing his house would be torched next, he ordered his wife and two daughters out of the hut and into the pit. Three concrete rings, normally used for wells, lined their makeshift fallout shelter.

His wife, Ma Cho Zwa, remembers pulling a concrete lid over their heads, leaving it open a crack for air. She felt her daughters tremble with fear.

Their father says he told them, "Stay very still."

They heard a roar, he says, their house going up in flames. A few seconds later, they felt tremendous heat -- bamboo burns so hot it can bend nearby metal. Their bunker became an oven.

Because he was on the bottom of the pit, shielded by his family, Kyaw Zwa survived with only minor burns on his scalp, hands and back. His wife suffered more severe burns on her back, arms and face. Flames engulfed the girls, who
jumped out of the pit and ran like human torches. Their father says, "They ran like mad women, burning."

**Soldiers demand to know refugees' religion**

So what do the girls' deaths, tragic as they are, have to do with their religion? People in the camps, including representatives of outside human rights organizations, say that in these and similar instances, soldiers appear to use the attacks to terrify and demoralize Christians.

While the girls' parents huddled in the pit with their daughters, again and again they heard the soldiers shouting at their neighbors: "Are you a Buddhist or a Christian?"

This was the Christian section of the camp, but all their neighbors, apparently fearing for their lives, said "Buddhist," according to Kyaw Zwa.

Mary On, vice chairman of the Karen Refugee Committee, and a Karen herself, oversees the 8,000 people in the Huay Kaloke camp. She says soldiers asked many refugees that night whether they were Christians or Buddhists. On said four people, all of them Christians, died from the March 11 attack. About 1,200 houses, roughly 85 percent of the camp, burned.

On says the camp's Baptist church was among the first buildings to be torched. But the Buddhist monastery and the homes surrounding it were untouched.

The message, she says, was clear: "They show that they love the Buddhists and want to do in the Christians." Kyaw Zwa, mourning the loss of his daughters, put it differently: "They hate the Karen. But they hate the Christian Karen more."

Experienced Burma watchers, including some in the camp, say they doubt the soldiers have any particular personal animosity toward Christians. More likely, they said, is that the soldiers are being ordered to behave in a way that divides ethnic groups along religious lines, while attempting to rob refugees of a source of strength and identity, their churches.

Hepner, a Canadian human rights activist who concentrates on the Karens from his base in Thailand, documented the attack on the Huay Kaloke camp in detail. His report, based on observations of eyewitnesses, also showed soldiers going through the camp, asking whether refugees were Christian or Buddhist.
"If you say you're a Christian, they'll walk up to you like they're going to kill you, point the gun at your head and just say 'pow,' without pulling the trigger," Hepner says. That illustrates, he says, that few of the soldiers want to kill based on religion. They are told to ask religious questions, he says, as a psychological tactic.

Mirante agrees: "They play the ethnic card and the religion card in an attempt to divide and conquer their enemies."

When the Karens split along religious lines in 1995, the military regime was ecstatic, Hepner says, because it allows the regime to blame Karens for attacking fellow Karens in the refugee camps.

"If you can control religion, you can use it to your advantage, and that's what the regime is trying to do," Hepner says. "They would love to see a full-blown religious war among the Karen."

**Christian group crosses border to see plight of the Karens**

In June, representatives from Christian Freedom International, accompanied by Karen guerrillas, crossed the Moei River en route to Tennutah, a small village in Burma, where the Karens had a military base.

The trip was risky. Although the base was only a few miles from the docking point in Thailand, and the narrow, brown Moei was easily navigable in a long, wooden boat that combined elements of a gondola and canoe, the enemy was last seen only five miles away.

Once across the border, the Americans, who had no visas from Burma, would depend on the Karen guerrillas, who in skirmish after skirmish had been overwhelmed, though not totally defeated, by the larger and more sophisticated Burmese troops. Once docked in Burma, the Americans followed their guides along a narrow, uphill path through the thick jungle.

"Just stay on the path, and you won't step on any land mines," said Dr. Saw Pothawda, a 60-year-old medical doctor, soldier and former marathon runner.

Once up the hill, the group arrived at the military base, where it read four rules on a chalkboard sign, written in English.

"Surrender is out of the question."
"We will retain our arms."

"Karen sovereign state must be recognized."

"We will decide our own destiny."

After Jim Jacobson, Christian Freedom's president, met with the camp's general, who sat in a red lawn chair wearing a white sleeveless T-shirt, he was led to a makeshift hospital. There, he interviewed Win Oo, 23, a Karen guerrilla who had stepped on a land mine. Win Oo reclined on a mat on a bamboo platform, smoking a cigarette, as flies crawled over his bandages.

A Buddhist, Win Oo said enemy soldiers try to recruit him and other Karen Buddhists to their side, arguing that the Karen National Union is led by self-serving Christians.

"They call Karen Christians 'closed-eye people' because they close their eyes when they pray," Win Oo said. "They say Buddhists are open-eyed and know much more than the closed-eye people."

The story helped persuade Jacobson to build a hospital at that site for the Karen and to provide medical supplies. In its July magazine sent to Christian constituents in the United States, Christian Freedom International said "Freedom Hospital" will "provide life-saving essential medicine, treatment, training and hope to persecuted Christians and others."

It promised that "Bible verses will soon be posted on every wall."

The board of Christian Freedom International includes Sen. Don Nickles, R-Okla., who earlier this month wrote legislation unanimously passed by Congress requiring the president to take action against nations that persecute on the basis of religion.

The president will have a range of options, from a mild, private rebuke to strong economic sanctions.

Against Burma, the United States has already taken a strong stance for a wide range of human rights abuses. As of 1996, no new U.S. investments are allowed in the country. The United States has also vowed to block financing to Burma from international lending institutions.
The anti-Burma movement has also spread to the local level in Portland. In July, the City Council became the 21st city in the United States to put restrictions on doing business with any company that deals with Burma.

Because of its religious persecution and other abuses, Mirante says she hopes Burma will become "another South Africa," which eventually reformed its apartheid policy when it could no longer bear international outrage.

Church services, Christian schools thrive in a land of refugees About 30 miles north of where the girls died in the refugee camp fire, nearly 400 people pack a bamboo, open-air structure with a sheet-metal roof. This is one of several Sunday church services in the Mae La Camp, the home of 30,844 Karens, making it one of the largest refugee camps on the Thailand-Burma border.

Children sit nearly motionless in 90-degree heat with high humidity, seemingly oblivious to a white dog with black spots roaming up and down the aisles, his tail pointing high in the air. This is a special day, celebrating the opening of Kawthoolei Karen Baptist Bible School. Thirty-two students stand in recognition, the boys in red vests and white button-down shirts, the girls in white robes.

The girls sit down as the boys sing "Stand up for Jesus" in Karen. Such scenes are common in the 13 refugee camps. Nearly every one has at least one Christian school to give both children and adults something hopeful to take their minds off their hardships.

In the Mawker camp, the home of 8,385 Karen refugees, a school sponsored by the California-based Remote Area Ministries provides a curriculum that rivals some American seminaries. It includes classes in the Old Testament, the New Testament, the minor prophets, the major prophets, church history, comparative religions, homiletics (the art of preparing and delivering sermons), hermeneutics (the interpretation of literature), public speaking, administration, prosperity and spiritual warfare.

The last subject might be the most important, says teacher Nerclay Thanage, a Karen refugee. He says nearly everyone here is a victim of persecution, but they try not to feel sorry for themselves, realizing their real enemy is not the Burmese, but the devil and his legions.

"We thank God a lot," Nerclay Thanage says. "If we think a lot about our enemies or our problems, or our persecution, we won't forgive. And we must
forgive. This is the spiritual principle of Christianity. Without forgiveness, you can't have peace."

There is much to forgive.

Paw Lay Lay, 36, tells of Burmese soldiers coming to her door and demanding to see her husband. Without saying a word, they shot him dead and walked away, leaving his body in the street as Paw Lay Lay fell to her knees with her mother and three children, praying: "God, take care of us. Let us pass this time of persecution."

She says she doesn't know why her husband was killed, but she suspects "part of the reason was because he was a Christian."

Dee Gay, 71, says that during the 50-year history of the war, he has been forced to go to the front lines 15 times to help the Burmese army fight his own people. Duties included making tents, cooking meals and digging bunkers. He says he was often ridiculed by Buddhists used to worshipping in front of large images of Buddha. "'You worship those you don't see,'" Dee Gay says he was told.

After soldiers broke up a church service last year to enlist his 14-year-old son and several other Karen boys, Dee Gay says he decided to flee Burma for a refugee camp.

Nerclay Thanage instructs his students to sing. With smiles on their faces, they clap and sway, singing, "I'm so glad Jesus set me free. Sing glory, Hallelujah, Jesus set me free."

With little real freedom here, these believers look to heaven for inspiration, as they do in all the refugee camps.

Kyaw Zwa, who lost his two daughters in the fire, says he wondered for a time why their prayers for safety weren't answered. He says he has an answer he can live with.

"I know now," Kyaw Zwa says, wiping away a tear, "that God helped me and let my two daughters die. They are gone. But they are free."